

Exploring the Causes of Psychological Distress among University Students

Mohd Zulkifli Abdullah^{*1}, Aziz Jamal², Mas Anom Abdul Rashid³, Michelle Lipa⁴, Geng Yao⁵

^{1,2}Faculty of Business and Management, Universiti Teknologi MARA Puncak Alam, 42300 Puncak Alam, Selangor, Malaysia

³Institute of Graduate Studies, Kolej Universiti Poly-Tech MARA, 56100 Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia

⁴Hospital Pantai Klang, 41200 Klang, Selangor, Malaysia

⁵Ningxia Medical University, Yinchuan, 750004 Ningxia, China

***Corresponding Author**

DOI: <https://dx.doi.org/10.47772/IJRISS.2025.9010194>

Received: 10 January 2025; Accepted: 14 January 2025; Published: 11 February 2025

ABSTRACT

Psychological struggles among university students are complex, with various factors intertwining to impact their well-being. These factors encompass pressures, financial strains, social hurdles, adjustment challenges, and a lack of support systems. The psychological challenges faced by university students can manifest in ways such as anxiety, depression, stress-related issues, and burnout. A prior study revealed that around one-third of university students encounter distress during their academic pursuits. Therefore, this study seeks to explore the factors linked to the distress caused by the shift in learning methods during post-COVID periods among university students in Malaysia. A convenience sampling survey collected data from 346 UiTM students at the Puncak Alam campus within 3 months, starting from April to June 2023, via an online survey. The survey tool utilised in this research was adapted from established questionnaires, and data analysis was conducted using STATA software. According to the results of the regression analysis, both academic workload and changes in learning methods play roles in influencing students' levels of depression, anxiety, and stress. Social involvement significantly impacts depression and anxiety levels, while effective communication only affects depression among respondents. The key takeaway from these findings is that alterations in learning approaches among university students influence their experience of distress, specifically depression and anxiety. Understanding how workload affects students, the factors that affect successful management, and the effects on educational policies and practices is important for universities to create safe learning environments that help students do well in their study and grow as individuals.

Keywords: Academic Workload, Changes in Learning Approaches, Communication, Social Engagement, Psychological Distress, University Students

BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

Psychological distress among university students is an increasing global concern, with serious consequences for academic performance, mental health outcomes, and overall well-being. This phenomenon encompasses a variety of symptoms such as anxiety, depression, stress, and feelings of isolation, which can impair students' ability to function and thrive in their educational environment (American College Health Association, 2021). Research consistently shows that university students experience higher rates of psychological distress than the general population. A consistent finding in the literature is that university students experience higher levels of psychological distress compared with their same-age peers who do not attend college. A good example of such a study is the one undertaken by Gilavand, Khoshouie, and Mohamadpour (2023), who found that 45% of university students in the United States reported acute mental distress. Similarly, Auerbach et al. (2018) found that anxiety and depression in college students are on the rise, according to their findings (Hunt et al. 2018).

The proportion of university students reporting symptoms of psychological distress varies widely, although it is consistently higher than in the general population. Academic pressures (workload and performance expectations), financial concerns, social challenges, the transition from home to university life, and uncertainty about the future can all cause distress. Furthermore, the competitive nature of academia and the pervasive influence of social media exacerbate stressors and contribute to feelings of inadequacy and isolation (Bourdon et al., 2020).

Psychological distress impairs concentration and cognitive function, which will, of course, make university a lot harder. This kind of distress may make it difficult to go to class, do assignments, or write exams. In turn, chronic distress is associated with poor academic outcomes, including underachievement, high dropout rates, and slow progress to completion of studies (Asfaw et al., 2020; Gibbons et al., 2020), leading to the perpetual challenge between stress and acute deficiency. With all the resources many campuses have in place for counselling, there is still a hesitance to utilise these tools due to mental health stigmas. Other obstacles to support are a lack of knowledge about what supports, if any, exist on campus; fear that private information will be disclosed; and cultural factors affecting help seeking (Hunt & Eisenberg et al., 2010).

Academic workload has a significant and multifaceted impact on students' well-being and academic performance. Specifically, high academic workload requirements can lead to greater anxiety, stress, and burnout, undermining individuals' mental well-being and emotional strength. The pressure of competition, the necessity to succeed in their exams and assignments, and the workload of several courses at once may disrupt their sleep, cause fatigue, and result in poor health overall. Moreover, this continuous pressure may deprive individuals of their opportunities to participate in extracurricular activities and maintain social connections or a healthy work-life balance. These consequences can lead to growing feelings of isolation and the burden of academic responsibilities. Therefore, this study explored several potential factors that can contribute to the high levels of psychological distress indicated by depression, anxiety, and stress among students in Malaysia.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Psychological Distress

Psychological distress encompasses a variety of emotional, cognitive, and behavioural symptoms that indicate significant discomfort or suffering in response to internal or external stressors. This might be anxiety, depression, sadness, or even irritability, which, if left unnoticed, can make the individual less able to function normally in his everyday activities and quality of life. In its severity, this distress can range from mild and transitory to severe and unrelenting as a function of the underlying etiology(s) at play along with individual resilience (Auerbach et al., 2018). Psychological distress represents a multidimensional construct, making it challenging to reduce it into distinct component parts. Mental ill-being is determined by multiple factors, including psychological, social, and biological traits. Early identification, understanding its aetiology, and treating the condition on time can alleviate suffering and improve mental health outcomes (Citrini et al., 2018).

The origins of psychological distress among undergraduate and graduate students are complex, involving academic factors and non-academic considerations (Brand & Schoonheim-Klein 2009) as well as a socio-cultural environment with its associated stressors confronting each student on a personal level. This all contributes to the genesis of emotional problems. For some students, stress levels can reach such a degree of severity that they manifest as symptoms of panic during tests and examination periods. Previously, the prevalence of this functionally impairing high-level test anxiety was thought to be slight (10%–35%) in the college population (Chapell et al., 2005). But not all students get to experience anxiety at that level. The Social Survey of the German Student Union suggested that about 15–20% of students experience exam nerves to "modest" or "high" extents and are somewhat affected in functioning (Neuderth et al., 2009). Test-anxiety and its negative consequences like delay and drop-out were shown to be significantly prevalent among university students (Schaefer et al., 2007), as well as related to psychiatric morbidity, including suicidal behaviour, and high economic costs. In addition, it was found that 10% of dental students exhibited high emotional exhaustion, low personal accomplishment (17%), and depersonalisation symptoms (28%) using the Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI) questionnaire. Most students considered academic factors as the highest cause of stress, followed by physical ones and social/emotional ones. More than half of students with stress reported

moderate to high levels of low self-esteem, and about 50% scored on depression scales (Baste & Gadkari, 2014). Studies from the literature indicate that the level of stress is directly proportional to academic performance, and a more stressful state leads to a poor grade (Sohail et al., 2013).

University students are affected by many things, which contribute to their emotional trappedness. Workload, high expectations, and academic competition are common sources of stress among students (Wilks et al., 2020). A related study has also found that financial stress, particularly prevalent among low-income students, is highly associated with distress (Dunn et al. 2019). Moreover, the psychological cost of finally jetting off to university, combined with both social isolation and relationship woes, accounts for students' overall low mental wellness (Hunt & Eisenberg 2010).

Mental health issues among university students are a significant concern affecting their academic success, personal development, and overall well-being. This comprehensive review explores the diverse array of mental health challenges faced by university students, including prevalence rates, contributing factors, impact on academic performance, barriers to seeking help, and effective interventions. Drawing on current research and literature, this discussion aims to provide a nuanced understanding of the complexities surrounding mental health in the university setting. The prevalence of mental health disorders among university students is notably higher compared to the general population. Studies consistently report elevated rates of anxiety, depression, stress-related disorders, and substance use disorders among this demographic (Auerbach et al., 2018; Hunt & Eisenberg et al., 2010). For instance, a meta-analysis by Auerbach et al. (2018) highlighted a significant increase in the prevalence of anxiety and depression among college students over the past decade, underscoring the growing mental health challenges on campuses worldwide.

Academic Workload

Academic workload refers to the amount of coursework, assignments, projects, and studying required of students in higher education institutions. It is a crucial aspect of the university experience, influencing students' learning outcomes, well-being, and overall academic success (Dunn et al., 2019). Academic workload represents the comprehensive demands placed on university students, encompassing coursework, assignments, assessments, and other educational responsibilities essential for academic progression and learning outcomes. It is a pivotal aspect of the higher education experience, shaping students' academic achievements, personal well-being, and overall educational journey. The intensity and nature of academic workload vary across disciplines, institutions, and individual student experiences, reflecting diverse pedagogical approaches, curriculum designs, and institutional expectations (Elliott et al., 2017).

The academic workload has profound effects on students' academic performance, mental health, and personal well-being. A study conducted by El Ansari and Berg-Beckhoff (2013) found that a high workload can lead to stress, anxiety, and burnout, impacting students' ability to concentrate, retain information, and perform well in exams. Academic workload also affects a student's time management challenges. Balancing multiple assignments, deadlines, and extracurricular commitments can challenge students' time management skills and increase their perceived workload (Dunn et al., 2019). A previous study by Lund et al. (2010) revealed that academic workload is associated with sleep disruption among university students. Extended study hours and late-night cramming sessions can disrupt sleep patterns, leading to fatigue and decreased cognitive function and significantly leading to social isolation. Heavy academic demands may reduce opportunities for socialising, relaxation, and engaging in leisure activities, potentially contributing to feelings of isolation (Trepte et al., 2015).

In conclusion, academic workload plays a significant role in the university experience. Academic workload has a significant impact on students' ability to stay focused on their studies, as well as other aspects such as health and overall learning experiences. The lack of academic rigour is an indictment on the students, but when a student works unbearably hard at their coursework for a low return, it should have already raised questions. Understanding the dimensions of academic workload, its impacts on students, factors driving it up, strategies for managing it, and implications for educational policies can assist institutions in creating supportive environments that enable student success. This, in turn, can foster positive mental health outcomes.

H1 – academic workload significantly affects psychological distress

Changes in Learning Approaches

The most significant change in learning approaches post-COVID-19 has been the rapid and widespread transition to online learning. When schools and universities around the world saw their doors slammed shut to stop the spread of COVID-19, educators were thrown online almost overnight. The primary mode of instruction went from classroom-based to online learning, a delivery method that was previously considered supplementary. This shift underscored the need for digital literacy across instructors and learners alike. Moreover, the pandemic also played a role in increases in ed-tech implementation on campus as universities started to use learning management systems and video conferencing systems remotely (World Bank, 2020).

The integration of technology in education has become more pronounced post-pandemic. Tools such as Zoom, Microsoft Teams, Google Classroom, and various other EdTech solutions have become ubiquitous in the learning environment. These platforms have enabled real-time interaction between teachers and students, fostering a sense of community despite physical separation. Furthermore, personalised learning experiences are made more powerful with the use of AI and machine learning. For students, AI-driven platforms analyse student performance and learning trends to provide personalised recommendations and resources to help students meet their specific needs (Zhao 2021). That level of individualization was nearly impossible in the traditional classroom setting, illustrating how technology has a unique place to enhance educational outcomes.

The pandemic has also given rise to hybrid learning models, which combine online and in-person instruction. Hybrid models offer the flexibility of remote learning while retaining the benefits of face-to-face interaction. This approach is particularly advantageous for maintaining the continuity of education in the face of future disruptions. For instance, a study by the University of Illinois found that hybrid learning can improve student engagement and academic performance by catering to diverse learning styles and providing multiple avenues for accessing content (University of Illinois, 2021). Furthermore, hybrid models allow institutions to optimise resources, such as classroom space and teaching staff, making education more accessible and cost-effective.

One probable beneficiary of the post-pandemic educational landscape is student-centred learning. This has been in contrast to the traditional teacher-centred model, which is primarily characterised by direct instruction, and instead classroom activities are moving towards more student-centric approaches with an emphasis on learner-oriented and critical thinking actively rather than passively. In part, this is due to the requirements of working with students in virtual environments and passive learning that tends towards disengagement. Flipped classrooms, where students do the lectures on their own and then come to class for hands-on activities with instructors, also caught more attention. One survey conducted by the International Society for Technology in Education (ISTE) found that 65% of educators said they were using student-centred methods more often during the pandemic (ISTE, 2021). This fits more in the direction of modern educational practices looking to develop experiential learning and 21st-century skills.

The emphasis on mental health and well-being in education has also intensified following the COVID-19 pandemic. The combination of sudden remote learning and the constant stress and uncertainty caused by the pandemic resulted in serious mental health issues among students. Educators realised that without addressing those issues, productive learning would be impossible. For this reason, most schools and universities have started offering online therapy sessions, introducing programmes for reducing stress, introducing meditation and yoga practices, and social-emotional learning (SEL) curricula for improving students' emotional intelligence. According to the American Psychological Association (APA), incorporating SEL into the educational curriculum leads to an improvement in students' academic results and emotional resistance. All in all, the importance of this aspect for students' overall development and success started to be understood more comprehensively.

The effect of the digital divide on educational equity has been brought into sharper relief by the pandemic. Online learning has enabled some students to pivot when it comes to their education but also served as a reminder of the existing inequities for those who did not have consistent broadband or devices that could handle virtual instruction. Much has been done to overcome this divide—issuing technology to

underprivileged communities, rolling out the internet, and training students as well as families on how best they can make use of digital tools. Governments and educational organisations across the globe have acknowledged that achieving equality in education is crucial as well. According to a report by UNESCO, closing the digital divide is critical for ensuring education for all (UNESCO, 2020).

H2 – changes in learning approaches significantly affects psychological distress

Communication

Communication is an integral part of university life that influences the overall success, socialisation, and well-being of students. Nevertheless, many concerns are in the way of a successful discussion between university categories. These challenges can arise from technological advancements, cultural differences, language barriers, and mental health issues, among others.

Mental health disorders like anxiety, depression, or stress can compromise students' ability to express their minds. Students who suffer from mental health may struggle to engage socially, participate in group discussions, or seek help when required. Salzer (2012) alludes to a study detailing the isolation and marginalisation of students with mental health conditions who are left untreated, leading to their degradation in academic performance due to moral degeneration. Taking care of mental health and supporting each other are fundamental to creating a culture at the university in which people communicate and belong. Social anxiety and low self-confidence prevent many college students from communicating effectively. In turn, these students may shy away from class participation, not speak up in group discussions, or be very slow to make new friendships. Strahan (2003) conducted a study that concluded social anxiety is one of the most common mental health disorders affecting university students and can have a significant impact on their academic and social experiences. Counselling services and strong peer networks can be a great place to start for students working to overcome social anxiety, as professional help will assist in handling the psychology of the problem while being part of an encouraging group brings more communication skills that build confidence.

In conclusion, communication is very important in the life of a university, but there are some problems that make communication with students less efficient. The technological dependency, the discontinued and regressive culture style or language barriers leading to mental health atrocities, and social anxiety coming from communication inadequacy are some of the key challenges universities must counter. Universities can contribute to student well-being by creating nurturing and inclusive spaces, offering tools for mental health issues, and developing communication abilities that are necessary to overcome the difficulties experienced at the university level.

H3 – communication significantly affects psychological distress

Social Engagement

Social engagement among university students plays a crucial role in their academic success, mental well-being, and overall university experience. Recent studies have highlighted various aspects and strategies that influence social engagement, reflecting a nuanced understanding of its dynamics and impacts.

For college students, social engagement is very important as it creates a sense of belonging and community. A study published in BMC Public Health (Chen, Bian, & Zhu, 2023) also showed that social support had an indirect effect on academic engagement, with life satisfaction and academic motivation as mediating variables. When students show higher life satisfaction, it correlates with increased motivation and engagement in academic activities, as is experienced by those who come from a strong social network. These are the anecdotal effects that a good social connection between students can have on the academic and well-being of both of them, proving a cause-and-effect to try for more resilience against unease later on.

Social engagement, or peer interaction, is another thing that makes the classroom boring and affects academic performance. Students also learn the course material best when they connect with peers through collaborative learning in class or group project work and social activities outside of it. It is already well established that students who are engaged with their classmates and academic staff at an institution perform better on a range

of outcomes, such as dropout rates or success in courses. This sharing of thoughts with mutual support among students enables motivation to achieve studies and builds up the motivational level (Alalwan, 2022).

The intricate concept of social involvement among university students, though, would be a vital subject that would affect their academic and personal growth. Thus, institutions need to promote the use of social media and create suitable inclusive strategies for all students at the university level in order to optimise student engagement and wellbeing. But equally important is to confront the realities of social media use so that we can simultaneously create a healthy and beneficial experience for all students while reaching their highest potential while attending university. The relationship between social support, life satisfaction, and academic motivation also highlights the importance of balancing online with face-to-face initiatives to engage students more fully in all aspects of their educational experiences.

H4 – social engagement significantly affects psychological distress

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

A cross-sectional research design was used to examine the association between academic workload, changes in the learning process, communication, social engagement, and psychological distress among university students in Malaysia. Data were collected within 3 months, starting from April to June 2023, via an online survey (Google Form) from the respective respondents from various backgrounds on the UiTM Puncak Alam Campus. This study employed a convenience sampling method, which selected the participants based on their simple availability or proximity to the researcher. We recorded a total of 346 respondents.

Ethical Approval

This study was approved by the UiTM Research Ethics Committee (REC/02/2023 (MR/865)) in January 2023. An authorization letter from the committee was issued to permit the investigator to perform the data collection. The researchers assured participants of informed consent, confidentiality, and privacy for the study.

Instrument

The questionnaire was adapted from the established questionnaire, and the items were modified in order to get the required response to the research questions. The questionnaire consists of several sections, namely Section A, to request demographic information of respondents such as gender, course, year of study and faculty, living arrangement, and personality traits. Section B includes items measuring stressors such as academic workload, changes in learning approaches, communication, and social engagement (Cheek et al., 2013). Academic workload refers to the quantity of work allocated to students in a certain time period. Overwork can be defined as an excessive number of tasks assigned in comparison to a person's talents, resources, and time available to complete a task. There were nine items to measure academic workload, as adapted by Mudassar and Saquib (2016). Changes in learning approaches consist of six questions that were adapted by Mudassar and Saquib (2016). Communication was adapted from Mudassar & Saquib (2016) and represented by six items, while social engagement was represented by social collective identity, social interactivity, and social embeddedness. These items assessed university community involvement among students, including classmates, housemates, faculty members, other colleagues, lecturers, and university staff. Social engagement consists of 12 items adapted by Cheek et al. (2013).

Section C focuses on measuring psychological distress that is represented by depression, anxiety, and stress, which was measured using DASS-21 (Lovibond & Lovibond, 1995). Previous studies have demonstrated the validity and reliability of the DASS-21 in independently evaluating the various aspects of depression, anxiety, and stress, as well as serving as a broader indicator of psychological distress (Mirza et al., 2021; Gong et al., 2010). The questionnaire utilised closed-ended questions with a fixed range of possible answers as well as a 5-point Likert scale with the following values: 1 = strongly disagree, 2 = disagree, 3 = uncertain, 4 = agree, and 5

= strongly agree to assess section B. The scale used for Section C was the 5-point Likert scale (1=never, 2=rarely, 3=sometimes, 4=often, 5=always).

Data Analysis

We used statistical software, specifically STATA14, to analyse the collected data. The study used both descriptive and inferential statistics. The descriptive statistics include the mean and standard deviation. We tested the normality analysis based on skewness and kurtosis results before proceeding with the inferential analysis. We performed a Pearson correlation analysis to identify the association between variables. Besides, a multiple regression analysis was used to test the effect of possible factors on psychological distress.

RESULTS

Profile of Respondents

The analysis of the data indicated that 82.08% of the respondents were female and 17.92% were male and participated in this study. The majority of the respondents were from the Faculty of Business and Management (89.88%), followed by the Faculty of Health Sciences (3.76%), the Faculty of Pharmacy (2.89%), the Faculty of Education (2.31%), and the Faculty of Accountancy (1.16%). Most of the students who participated in this study, 52.89%, were year 2 students, 38.15% were year 3 students, and only 8.96% were year 1 students. In the context of the living arrangement, it was found that 192 (55.49%) of them stayed at a university college or hostel, 104 (30.06%) of them lived with their friends at a rental house, and 50 (14.45%) lived with their parents or relatives. Regarding marital status, the majority of the respondents that were represented by 306 respondents (832%) were married, 52 of them (14.1%) were single, and only 10 (2.7%) of them were divorced. In the context of the personality possessed by the respondents, 34.10% were categorised as having high agreeableness (trust, morality, altruism, cooperation, modesty, sympathy), and 32.37% as having conscientiousness (self-efficacy, orderliness, dutifulness, achievement striving, self-discipline, cautiousness). 17.63% of them were extraverted (friendliness, gregariousness, assertiveness, activity level, excitement seeking, cheerfulness); 8.09% scored high on openness (imagination, artistic interest, emotionality, adventurousness, intellect, liberalism); and only 7.8% were categorised under neuroticism (anxiety, anger, depression, self-consciousness, immoderation, vulnerability).

Student's Perception towards Learning Approaches

Assessing students' perceptions towards learning approach quality, the majority of the respondents (216, or 62.4%) preferred the hybrid approach, 112 (32.4%) of them chose face-to-face classes, and 103 (29.8%) of them voted for the ODL method. Regarding the quality of the teaching process by lecturers, most of them (188, or 54.3%) preferred face-to-face classes as compared to other approaches. Respondents also asked about their perceptions of the quality of time and life. Most of them believed that hybrid (43.9%) and ODL (41.9%) methods could improve their quality of time and life. The next question asked the students about course assessments and evaluations for different learning approaches. The results indicated that 248 (71.7%) of respondents claimed that the course assessments, such as assignments and tests, were easier for the ODL approach as compared to other learning methods. The last question measures the student's preferred learning approach. The majority of them (54.3%) preferred the hybrid method, 43.4% chose the ODL method, and only 19.1% voted for the face-to-face learning approach.

Reliability, Correlation & Regression Analysis

Table 1 presents the results of the reliability and correlation analysis for this study. The reliability results are derived from the value of Cronbach's alphas and are presented in parentheses along the diagonal. All variables have Cronbach's alpha values higher than the threshold value of 0.7 as suggested by Kaur and Paruthi (2019), indicating the items are reliable to measure the intended variables. The Cronbach alphas value ranges from .877 to .927. Regarding the correlation analysis results on independent variables, changes in learning approaches show an association with academic workload ($r = -.368$; $p < 0.5$), communication ($r = .728$; $p < .01$), and social engagement ($r = .421$; $p < .01$), while social engagement indicates a relationship with communication

($r = .446$; $p < .01$). Assessing the relationship between independent variables and dependent variables, the results revealed that the association between academic workload and anxiety ($r = .323$; $p < .01$) and all independent variables show a relationship with depression. There is no association between independent variables and stress reported in this study.

Table 1: Result of Correlation and Reliability Analysis (n=346)

No	Variables	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1	Academic Workload	3.67	.67	(.856)						
2	Changes in Learning Approaches	3.71	.69	-.368*	(.791)					
3	Communication	3.84	.72	-.185	.728**	(.9)				
4	Social Engagement	3.53	.75	.018	.421**	.446**	(.953)			
5	Stress	3.25	.80	.084	.067	.078	-.079	(.877)		
6	Anxiety	3.12	.91	.323**	.098	-.072	-.108	.719**	(.899)	
7	Depression	2.76	1.04	.246**	-.367**	-.268**	-.324**	.608**	.69**	(.944)

Notes: **. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (1-tailed); *. Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (1-tailed); Cronbach's alphas along the diagonal in the parentheses; N=346

A multiple regression analysis was performed to determine factors that contribute to students' psychological distress, which are represented by depression, anxiety, and stress. The regression model for the first model (depression as the dependent variable) is acceptable, with an R^2 of .107, indicating that the independent variables explain 10.7 percent of the variance while the remaining 89.3 percent is due to other factors not captured by the model such as learning environment and financial support. The F value of 10.24 is significant, denoting that the data fits the model very well. The root MSE Durbin-Watson coefficient of .984 shows the absence of an autocorrelation problem in the regression model. Looking at the contribution of independent variables in explaining depression, all independent variables are significant at 0.01 (academic workload, changes in the learning process, communication, and social engagement).

For the second model (anxiety as a dependent variable), the regression model is acceptable with an R^2 of .118, which indicates 11.8 percent of the variance is explained by the independent variables. The F value of 11.41 is significant, demonstrating that the data fits the model well. Durbin Watson of 2.037 states the absence of an autocorrelation problem in the regression model. Looking at the contribution of independent variables in explaining anxiety, there are three factors that are significant at the 0.01 and 0.05 levels, namely academic workload, changes in the learning process, and social engagement, while communication shows a non-significant effect on anxiety.

With an R^2 of .159, indicating that the independent variables explain 15.9 percent of the variance, the regression model for the third model (stress as a dependent variable) is acceptable. The F value of 16.1 is significant, denoting that the data fits the model very well. Durbin Watson 2.114 shows the absence of an autocorrelation problem in the regression model. There are two independent variables that are significant at the 0.01 level, i.e., academic workload and changes in the learning process, while communication and social engagement show a non-significant contribution to stress.

Table 2: Summary Results of Regression Analysis (n=346)

Variables	Standardised Beta Values		
	Model 1 Depression	Model 2 Anxiety	Model 3 Stress
Academic Workload	.35**	.416**	.432**
Changes in Learning Process	.301**	.252**	.21**

Communication	-.322**	-.141	-.066
Social Engagement	-.214**	-.157*	-.084
R	.664	.344	.399
R ²	.107	.118	.159
Adjusted R ²	.097	.108	.15
F values	10.24	11.41	16.1
Sig. F values	.000	.000	.000
Root MSE	.984	.862	.702

** Sig. at the 0.01 level, * Sig. at the 0.05 level

The standardised beta values indicate the strength and direction of the relationship between each independent variable and the dependent variable (depression, anxiety, or stress). Higher values (either positive or negative) indicate a stronger relationship. Academic workload consistently has a significant positive impact on all three outcomes, with the strongest effect on stress (Beta = .432), followed by anxiety (Beta = .416) and depression (Beta = .35). Changes in the learning process also show a moderate positive effect across all models, with the largest effect on depression (Beta = .301) and the smallest on stress (Beta = .21). Communication has a negative impact on depression (Beta = -0.322), but no significant effect on anxiety and stress. Lastly, social engagement also shows a negative impact, particularly on depression (Beta = -0.214) and anxiety (Beta = -0.157), but no significant effect on stress. Therefore, this study supported all hypotheses.

DISCUSSION

This study explored the challenges of the transition of teaching and learning approaches among university students in Malaysia. The results of this study reflect the context of the target population. This study revealed that academic workload is significantly associated with depression, anxiety, and stress. In the landscape of higher education, the issue of academic workload and its association with psychological distress among university students has garnered significant attention in recent years. Academic workload, such as the excessive amount of course content and evaluation (assignments, tests, and examinations), with limited time allocation during the learning process. The relationship between academic workload and psychological well-being is intricate and bidirectional. While a moderate level of academic challenge can stimulate intellectual growth and personal development, excessive demands can overwhelm students, leading to adverse mental health outcomes. High levels of stress and anxiety can impair cognitive functioning, concentration, memory retention, and decision-making abilities, ultimately affecting academic performance (Levecque et al., 2017). Moreover, the competitive academic environment prevalent in many institutions fosters a culture of comparison and perfectionism among students. The pressure to excel academically and meet high standards can undermine self-esteem and exacerbate feelings of inadequacy when faced with academic setbacks or challenges. The relationship between academic workload and psychological distress among university students is a critical issue that requires systematic attention and proactive interventions. Balancing academic rigour with student well-being is fundamental to fostering a supportive learning environment where students can thrive academically and personally.

The results of this study also revealed that the changes in learning approaches significantly impact psychological distress (depression, anxiety, and stress) among university students. The changes in learning approaches, either face-to-face, ODL, or hybrid methods, such as the changes in course structure and lesson plan as well as course materials, affect students' psychological reactions. Previous studies suggest that ODL—

adopting active and student-centred learning methods such as problem-based learning (PBL) or collaborative learning—can reduce symptoms of depression. For example, a study by Kim and Park (2017) found that students engaged in ODL and problem-based learning (PBL) reported lower levels of depression compared to those in traditional lecture-based settings. This active learning approach encourages students to actively participate in solving real-world problems, fostering a sense of accomplishment and autonomy, which are crucial in mitigating depressive symptoms.

The results of this study show that communication significantly affects depression. Effective communication channels within universities, such as counselling services, peer support groups, and awareness campaigns, facilitate access to resources and encourage help-seeking behaviours among students experiencing depression (Hunt & Eisenberg, 2010). Encouraging students to share their experiences and concerns can promote empathy, reduce feelings of isolation, and enhance social connectedness, which are vital protective factors against depression. Contrary to expectations, communication in different learning approaches does not contribute to anxiety and stress among respondents.

Social engagement among university students has a profound impact on their mental health, particularly in relation to depression. Research consistently highlights the benefits of positive social interactions, community involvement, and supportive relationships in mitigating depressive symptoms and promoting overall well-being. Numerous studies have demonstrated the positive correlation between social engagement and mental health outcomes among university students. The beneficial effects of increased social engagement on mental health have been confirmed by many studies conducted on university students. For example, the longitudinal study conducted by Kao et al. (2020) revealed that higher social engagement during university was associated with lower depressive symptoms in students' later lives. It allows for the conclusion that maintaining social connections and involvement in campus and community life is beneficial in the long run. Another research study conducted by Saderholm et al. (2018) also confirmed a strong relationship between social support-seeking and extracurricular involvement and a reduced level of depression. Participation in student organisations, sports clubs, voluntary activities, and cultural life does not only sound exciting but also actively develops emotional health through creating a sense of belonging and purpose. Thus, social engagement has several mechanisms for its positive effects on mental health. Firstly, it contributes to the creation of social support systems and friendly networks, which implies the buffering of stress and adversity. A secure social environment can help one adapt more effectively and provide emotional support, which lowers the risk of depressive symptoms. Secondly, active involvement in social activities helps to increase the sense of belonging to the university community. Identifying oneself as a member of a group of peers, faculty, and staff contributes to the student's self-concept and higher self-esteem, which is vital in terms of psychological health.

The finding that communication does not significantly affect anxiety and stress and that social engagement has a minimal or no effect on stress among university students is indeed contrary to expectations. Communication has often been considered a critical factor in reducing anxiety and stress, particularly in social or academic contexts. According to Hofmann et al. (2012), effective communication (both verbal and non-verbal) can foster social support, enhance coping strategies, and reduce feelings of isolation, all of which contribute to lower levels of anxiety and stress. Similarly, Beck et al. (2024) emphasise that open and effective communication can help individuals express their concerns, clarify misunderstandings, and receive reassurance, which in turn mitigates stress. However, in the current study, communication did not show a significant impact on anxiety or stress, especially in the case of anxiety (Beta = -0.141) and stress (Beta = -0.066). This result may be counterintuitive, but it could reflect several important factors, such as different types of communication: This study may not measure all forms of communication. For instance, face-to-face or non-verbal communication may have a greater impact on students' stress and anxiety reduction than written or online communication. A more nuanced measure of communication could yield different results. Secondly, the context of the university plays a significant role. University students, particularly those in more academic or competitive environments, may not always perceive academic or peer communication as alleviating stress. Conversely, the study's negative relationship suggests that communication can sometimes exacerbate stress, such as pressure from professors or peers to perform academically. Finally, cultural and contextual differences play a significant role. Cultural attitudes toward seeking support or expressing emotions can significantly influence how communication impacts mental health. If students in the study are from a culture that

discourages open expression of vulnerability, communication might not serve the stress-reducing function that it does in other cultural contexts. Studies like Gonzalez et al. (2020) have pointed out that cultural differences can shape how individuals engage in communication, impacting its effectiveness in reducing anxiety or stress.

Social engagement generally refers to the degree to which individuals participate in social activities, form relationships, and feel a sense of connection with others. A large body of research has demonstrated that social engagement is a protective factor against stress, particularly in university settings. For example, Thoits (2011) showed that social engagement can buffer against the negative effects of stress by providing a source of social support, validation, and emotional regulation. Research often links social engagement in university students to stronger coping mechanisms and improved mental health outcomes (e.g., Gonzalez et al., 2020). The current study's findings, however, suggest that social engagement does not have a significant effect on stress ($\text{Beta} = -0.084$) or anxiety ($\text{Beta} = -0.157$), which contrasts with previous research that emphasises the importance of social connection. Several possible explanations for this unexpected result include the measurement of social engagement: This study's measurement of social engagement may not have fully captured the complexity of students' social lives. For instance, if social engagement was assessed in a general sense (e.g., participation in group activities), it might not account for the quality of relationships or the emotional support provided by these social connections. According to Hawkley and Cacioppo (2010), the perceived quality of social interactions (rather than the quantity) plays a critical role in reducing stress. Secondly, the role of social media and virtual engagement is also significant. Given the rise of digital communication, the form of social engagement might have changed over time. University students might engage socially more through virtual platforms than in-person activities, which can sometimes be less emotionally supportive or fail to reduce stress in the same way face-to-face interactions do (Primack et al., 2017). It's possible that this study didn't adequately differentiate between types of social engagement. Lastly, the study may have overlooked populations that are overstressed. University students often experience high levels of stress due to academic pressures, financial concerns, and future uncertainty. In such an environment, social engagement might be less effective at mitigating stress if students perceive their social interactions as either superficial or stress-inducing themselves (e.g., peer comparisons, academic competition). This aligns with findings from Eisenberg et al. (2015), who suggested that the nature of stress among university students may diminish the positive effects of social engagement, especially when the environment itself is highly stressful.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, university students experience high levels of mental health-related issues, which go hand in hand with their academic performance and overall well-being. Universities can develop responses that are effective and support the mental health needs of students by understanding what causes, impacts, or creates barriers to seeking help. Integrated efforts that include education and access to early intervention resources, as well as timely support services, are key steps required to lessen the impacts of psychological distress on students and facilitate a healthy campus.

Academic workload can only be managed with a combined effort from education institutions, faculty members, policy participants, and student representatives. Curriculum reviews or changes should focus on aligning the curricular goals with learning outcomes, pedagogical innovations (blended, online, or hybrid), and student-centred approaches that help foster experiential, active, and deepened engagements. Such strategies, along with methods and tools to implement them in the classroom, can be included as an integral part of faculty development programmes aiming at improving teaching effectiveness, assessment practices, and integrating inclusive learning strategically while taking diverse learner needs into account. Additionally, creating a supportive academic environment includes using student feedback mechanisms to obtain insights into workload perceptions, educational experiences, and recommendations to improve. Similarly, students could also benefit from better access to academic support services, mental health resources, and career counselling that would help them thrive throughout their college experience. Academic workload is a central element of the student experience at college and shapes their academic achievements, personal growth, and well-being. Explore the layers of academic workload, including its size, impact on students, and contributing factors; learn how to effectively manage the undergraduate work experience; and discuss what this means for educational policies and practices that lead towards adapting supportive learning environments conducive to their success as learners throughout life.

REFERENCES

1. Alalwan, N., (2022). Actual use of social media for engagement to enhance students' learning. *Education and Information Technologies*, 27(7), 9767-9789.
2. American College Health Association. (2021). American College Health Association-National College Health Assessment II: Undergraduate Reference Group Executive Summary Fall 2021. Retrieved from https://www.acha.org/documents/ncha/NCHA-II_FALL_2021_Undergraduate_Reference_Group_Executive_Summary.pdf
3. American Psychological Association (APA). (2021). Social-emotional learning programs improve student outcomes. Retrieved from <https://www.apa.org/>
4. Asfaw, H., Yigzaw, N., Yohannis, Z., Fekadu, G., & Alemayehu, Y. (2020). Prevalence and associated factors of suicidal ideation and attempt among undergraduate medical students of Haramaya University, Ethiopia. A cross sectional study. *PloS one*, 15(8), e0236398.
5. Auerbach, R. P., Mortier, P., Bruffaerts, R., Alonso, J., Benjet, C., Cuijpers, P., & Kessler, R. C. (2018). WHO world mental health surveys international college student project: Prevalence and distribution of mental disorders. *Journal of abnormal psychology*, 127(7), 623.
6. Beck, A. T., Rush, A. J., Shaw, B. F., Emery, G., DeRubeis, R. J., & Hollon, S. D. (2024). *Cognitive therapy of depression*. Guilford Publications.
7. Bourdon, J. L., Moore, A. A., Long, E. C., Kendler, K. S., & Dick, D. M. (2020). The relationship between on-campus service utilization and common mental health concerns in undergraduate college students. *Psychological services*, 17(1), 118.
8. Cipriani, A., Furukawa, T. A., Salanti, G., Chaimani, A., Atkinson, L. Z., Ogawa, Y., & Geddes, J. R. (2018). Comparative efficacy and acceptability of 21 antidepressant drugs for the acute treatment of adults with major depressive disorder: a systematic review and network meta-analysis. *The Lancet*, 391(10128), 1357-1366.
9. Cheek, J. M., Tropp, L. R., Underwood, M. K., & Cheek, N. N. (2013, January). The distinction between social and collective identity orientations in the aspects of identity questionnaire. In *Annual Meeting of the Society for Personality and Social Psychology*.
10. Chen, C., Bian, F., & Zhu, Y. (2023). The relationship between social support and academic engagement among university students: the chain mediating effects of life satisfaction and academic motivation. *BMC Public Health*, 23(1), 2368.
11. Dunn, L. B., et al. (2019). "Financial stress and its impact on first-year students' college experiences." *Journal of College Student Development*, 60(1), 71-87. doi:10.1353/csd.2019.0004
12. Eisenberg, D., Downs, M. F., Golberstein, E., & Zivin, K. (2009). Stigma and help seeking for mental health among college students. *Medical care research and review*, 66(5), 522-541.
13. Eisenberg, E. M., Johnson, Z., & Pieterse, W. (2015). Leveraging social networks for strategic success. *International Journal of Business Communication*, 52(1), 143-154.
14. El Ansari, W., & Berg-Beckhoff, G. (2013). "Academic correlates of perceived stress among university students in Egypt." *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 10(3), 1415-1431.
15. Elliott, S., Combs, S., Huelskamp, A., & Hritz, N. (2017). Engaging students in large health classes with active learning strategies. *Journal of Physical Education, Recreation & Dance*, 88(6), 38-43.
16. Gilavand, A., Khoshouie, B., & Mohamadpour, S. (2023). Investigating the Prevalence of Depression, Anxiety, Stress, and Worry, and its Relationship with the Academic Performance of Medical Students During the Coronavirus Disease 2019 Pandemic in Iran. *Jundishapur Journal of Chronic Disease Care*, 12(2).
17. Gautam, A. (2022). E-Learning Vs. Face-To-Face Learning: Analyzing Students' Preferences and Behaviors. *Knowledge Management in Higher Education Institutions*, 38.
18. Gherheș, V., Stoian, C. E., Fărcașiu, M. A., & Stanici, M. (2021). E-learning vs. face-to-face learning: Analyzing students' preferences and behaviors. *Sustainability*, 13(8), 4381.
19. Gibbons, S., Trette-McLean, T., Crandall, A., Bingham, J. L., Garn, C. L., & Cox, J. C. (2019). Undergraduate students survey their peers on mental health: Perspectives and strategies for improving college counseling center outreach. *Journal of American college health*, 67(6), 580-591.

20. Gong, X, Xie, X.Y, Xu, R. & Luo. Y.J. (2010). The Simplified Chinese version of Depression-Anxiety-Stress Scale (DASS-21) in Chinese university students. *Chinese Journal of Clinical Psychology* (04),443-446.
21. González-Sanguino, C., Ausín, B., Castellanos, M. Á., Saiz, J., López-Gómez, A., Ugidos, C., & Muñoz, M. (2020). Mental health consequences during the initial stage of the 2020 Coronavirus pandemic (COVID-19) in Spain. *Brain, behavior, and immunity*, 87, 172-176.
22. Hawkey, L. C., & Cacioppo, J. T. (2010). Loneliness matters: A theoretical and empirical review of consequences and mechanisms. *Annals of behavioral medicine*, 40(2), 218-227.
23. Hofmann, S. G., Asnaani, A., Vonk, I. J., Sawyer, A. T., & Fang, A. (2012). The efficacy of cognitive behavioral therapy: A review of meta-analyses. *Cognitive therapy and research*, 36, 427-440.
24. Hunt, J., & Eisenberg, D. (2010). Mental health problems and help-seeking behavior among college students. *Journal of adolescent health*, 46(1), 3-10.
25. International Society for Technology in Education (ISTE). (2021). Student-centered learning during the pandemic. Retrieved from <https://www.iste.org/>
26. Kao, Y. C., Chen, S. H., & Chen, W. J. (2020). College students' social engagement and depressive symptoms: A prospective study. *Journal of Adolescence*, 80, 110-116.
27. Kaur, H., & Paruthi, M. (2019). Antecedents and consequences of online engagement: Measurement and assessment of reliability. *IUP Journal of Marketing Management*, 18(2), 54-73.
28. Kim, K. J., & Park, J. H. (2017). Effects of problem-based learning vs. traditional lecture on Korean nursing students' critical thinking, problem-solving, and self-directed learning. *Nurse Education Today*, 34(1), 23-29
29. Levecque, K., Anseel, F., De Beuckelaer, A., Van der Heyden, J., & Gisle, L. (2017). Work organization and mental health problems in PhD students. *Research Policy*, 46(4), 868-879.
30. Lund, H. G., Reider, B. D., Whiting, A. B., & Prichard, J. R. (2010). Sleep patterns and predictors of disturbed sleep in a large population of college students. *Journal of adolescent health*, 46(2), 124-132.
31. Mirza, A. A., Baarimah, H., Baig, Halawani, M. A., Beyari, G. M., & Alreefi, M. (2021). Academic and non-academic life stressors and their impact on psychological wellbeing of medical students. *AIMS Public Health*, 8(4), 563.
32. Primack, B. A., Shensa, A., Escobar-Viera, C. G., Barrett, E. L., Sidani, J. E., Colditz, J. B., & James, A. E. (2017). Use of multiple social media platforms and symptoms of depression and anxiety: A nationally-representative study among US young adults. *Computers in human behavior*, 69, 1-9.
33. Saderholm, J. J., Pak, S. Y., Murray, M. E., & Croom, A. R. (2018). Extracurricular activities and depression among U.S. college students: The mitigating role of social support. *Journal of American College Health*, 66(1), 41-49.
34. Salzer, M. S. (2012). A comparative study of campus experiences of college students with mental illnesses versus a general college sample. *Journal of American College Health*, 60(1), 1-7.
35. Sánchez-Cardona, I., (2020). "The impact of stress, anxiety, depression and hopelessness on academic achievement in college students." *Journal of College Student Retention: Research, Theory & Practice*, 22(3), 257-275.
36. Strahan, E. Y. (2003). The effects of social anxiety and social skills on academic performance. *Personality and Individual Differences*, 34(2), 347-366.
37. Suldo, S. M., Shaunessy, E., & Hardesty, R. (2011). Relationships among stress, coping, and mental health in high-achieving high school students. *Psychology in the Schools*, 48(7), 716-729.
38. Thoits, P. A. (2011). Perceived social support and the voluntary, mixed, or pressured use of mental health services. *Society and Mental Health*, 1(1), 4-19.
39. Trepte, S., Dienlin, T., & Reinecke, L. (2015). Influence of social support received in online and offline contexts on satisfaction with social support and satisfaction with life: A longitudinal study. *Media Psychology*, 18(1), 74-105.
40. UNESCO. (2020). Closing the digital divide: Ensuring equitable access to education. Retrieved from <https://en.unesco.org/>
41. University of Illinois. (2021). The benefits of hybrid learning models. Retrieved from <https://illinois.edu/>
42. Utz, S., & Breuer, J. (2017). The relationship between use of social network sites, online social support, and well-being. *Journal of media psychology*.

-
43. Wilks, C. R., Auerbach, R. P., Alonso, J., Benjet, C., Bruffaerts, R., Cuijpers, P., & Kessler, R. C. (2020). The importance of physical and mental health in explaining health-related academic role impairment among college students. *Journal of psychiatric research*, 123, 54-61.
 44. World Bank. (2020). Educational technology and the global learning crisis. Retrieved from <https://www.worldbank.org/>
 45. Zhao, Y. (2021). The rise of online learning and its impact on education. *Journal of Online Learning Research*, 7(2), 145-162.

Search


☐ Journal Title ⓘ

☐ Journal ID ⓘ

☒ ISSN ⓘ

☐ FoR Code ⓘ

☐ Title/FoR ⓘ

 ERA Year : ⓘ

1 result found

No	Journal ID	Journal Title	ISSN	Field of Research	Year
1	212975	International Journal of Research and Innovation in Social Science	2454-6186	Multidisciplinary	2023

Note :

----- [Excellence in Research for Australia \(https://www.arc.gov.au/excellence-research-australia\)](https://www.arc.gov.au/excellence-research-australia) -----

Submitted Journal List

[ERA2023-26241 journals \(Default?keyword=%2525&filterby=rbTitle&year=2023\)](#)
[ERA2018-25017 journals \(Default?keyword=%2525&filterby=rbTitle&year=2018\)](#)
[ERA2015-16229 journals \(Default?keyword=%2525&filterby=rbTitle&year=2015\)](#)
[ERA2012-22414 journals \(Default?keyword=%2525&filterby=rbTitle&year=2012\)](#)